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ABSTRACT

The development of interaction skills is particularly well suited to the English classroom, especially one devoted to literature study. Through various interaction exercises, the student becomes sensitive to nonverbal messages, is enabled to reveal his feelings about himself, and can develop a sense of the relevancy of literature to the world as he sees it. Helping students become acquainted when forming new groups are the "identity reflection" and "preparticipation self-analysis" exercises; a "decision making" exercise based on a particular topic or story helps students relate personally to the subject matter; and the students are given practice in discussion skills through the "triad problem" exercise, which involves two-way communication--those group members who present the problem and those who receive it--plus an observer who provides necessary feedback. Such projects have proved valuable in achieving effective educational aims. (A list of references is included.) (JM)

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"Breaking Barriers to Classroom Discussions Through Interaction Exercises"

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The growing use of interaction exercises in schools today is an outgrowth of the current concern for man's ability to assimilate himself into various groups and to relate to others effectively. This is not a new objective of education, but until recently, educators have devoted little time or effort within the classroom to the affective domain. The realization that a student's emotional and social growth are as important, if not more so, than his intellectual development has led to the inclusion of sensitivity education in the classroom.

The Ford-Esalen project instituted in 1968 in selected California schools was one of the first projects to combine affective learning with the traditional curriculum. Its success led to the development of other such projects throughout the country. Some of those undertaken in the high school English classroom indicate the value of using interaction techniques to break the barriers to discussion.

A project at Horton Watkins High School in East St. Louis was developed by Gene Stanford and Dr. Gordon Garrett using experimental groups, who were exposed to sensitivity education, and control groups, who were not. It was considered a success, because students in experimental groups not only learned the

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cognitive English subject matter but developed their personal and social awareness as well.

An American literature teaching team at East Noble High School, Kendallville, Indiana, developed a group dynamics unit for their classes that was considered so successful it is now included in the English curriculum of every student at the sophomore level. Both of these projects used follow-up questionnaires which indicated that the students exposed to the interaction techniques felt they had developed more self-awareness and sensitivity to others, learned more from this class than from other previous English classes, enjoyed this class more than any other, and increased their abilities in group work.

The English classroom, particularly one devoted to the teaching of literature, lends itself naturally to the development of interaction skills. It is here that the student can learn to "read" non-verbal messages, which are often in direct contrast to what is being said aloud and which are frequently more effective than words in communicating feelings. It is in this classroom that the student can reveal how he feels about himself, others or the world about him through open-ended discussions and interaction exercises. The English classroom is a natural setting for the use of discussion techniques which allow the student to develop his own sense of the relevancy of literature to the "real" world.

What kinds of interaction exercises are suited for the

English classroom? Those which help students get acquainted when forming new groups, those which help students relate to the subject matter in personal ways, and those which provide practice in discussion skills.

The following exercise is helpful in starting a new group or in units related to the theme of identity. It is suitable for students in grades three through twelve and can be used in classes with as many as thirty students.

IDENTITY REFLECTION

Procedure: Using any or all of the figures below in any sequence or pattern, create a design, picture or message which reveals something about your identity. Figures may be used more than once and in any size.

Analysis: After everyone has completed his design, have him show it to the group and explain how it reflects who he is.

Discuss related questions, such as:
What does the uniqueness of the designs say about identity?
Is what we do who we are?
Is how we look who we are?

Materials: Blank sheets of paper for students.

The following exercise was created by Stuart Atkins and Thatcher Allen for the National Training Laboratories Institute, and is designed for starting groups, concluding groups, or taking inventory of groups.

PRE-PARTICIPATION SELF-ANALYSIS

Procedure: Allow group members time to fill in their responses to each of the statements in a foursome. Share responses through 10 minute interaction periods between foursomes.

1. When I enter a new group, I feel _____
2. When a group starts, I _____
3. When people first meet me, they _____
4. When I'm in a new group, I feel most comfortable when _____
(10 minutes for interaction)
5. When people remain silent, I feel _____
6. When someone does all the talking, I _____
7. I feel most productive when a leader _____
8. I feel annoyed when the leader _____
(10 minutes)
9. I feel withdrawn when _____
10. In a group, I am most afraid of _____
11. When someone feels hurt, I _____
12. I am hurt most easily when _____
(10 minutes)
13. I feel loneliest in a group when _____
14. Those who really know me think I am _____
15. I trust those who _____
16. I am saddest when _____
(10 minutes)
17. I feel closest to others when _____
18. People like me when I _____
19. Love is _____
20. I feel loved most when _____
(10 minutes)
21. If I could do it all over again _____
22. My greatest strength is _____
23. I could be _____
24. I am _____
(10 minutes)

In using the exercise above to start high school groups, the teacher may wish to use only the first few statements as the latter ones can reveal depths of feelings which a new group or inexperienced teacher could find difficulty in handling. Groups using this exercise should be limited in size to work effectively; those ranging in number between six and fifteen would work well.

An example of an exercise directly related to a literature unit on science fiction or the theme of values is the following, which involves decision making as an individual and as a group member. It could be used for the discussion of such stories as Bradbury's "The Flying Machine" or Van Tilburg Clark's "The Portable Phonograph".

POPULATING A NEW PLANET

A Decision Making Exercise

Procedure: Using the following information make an individual decision; then, using consensus, make a group decision.

Situation: A nuclear war which will annihilate the entire human race is about to occur. Your country has developed a rocket ship which can take only three passengers, in additon to its three member crew, to another planet. You are a member of a special task force which must select the three passengers from the following list. Assuming that each is an expert in his field, rank the three you would send in order of their value in starting a new society. One of the crew members, the poet and the educator are females; the rest are males.

____1. An atomic scientist
____2. A doctor (general practioneer)
____3. A military genius
____4. A political statesman
____5. A Christian evangelist
____6. A social psychologist
____7. A musical composer
____8. A poet
____9. A business magnate
___10. An educator
___11. An inventor of intricate mechanisms
___12. A court justice

Analysis: Allow the group to discuss their choices and to form a consensus as to which three should be taken.

Discuss how the choices made both by individuals and the group reflect the values placed on society's members and their roles.

The decision making exercise just described is also good for observing group processes in arriving at a consensus. Using the teacher or other students as observers who give non-judgmental feedback to the group on how it functioned can help the group evaluate the effectiveness of the interaction process. This exercise is suited best for groups numbering fifteen or less and for junior high and high school level students.

The third area for employing interaction techniques in English is in developing discussion skills. The triad problem exercise helps students understand the importance of the two-way communication process of relating a problem and listening to one. The purpose of the third member of the triad is to help develop observation skills and to provide valuable feedback for the members presenting and receiving the problem.

TRIAD PROBLEM EXERCISE

Procedure: Form the class into clusters of three and have each member assume one of the following roles: problem giver, problem adviser, and observer. These roles will be interchanged so that each person will serve in each role.

Stage #1: The problem giver is to present a problem to the adviser. The problem may or may not be related to the class or school, but it must be one with which he thinks the adviser can help.

The adviser's role is to listen to the problem silently.

The observer listens silently.

Stage #2: The adviser restates the problem before offering advice. This must be done to the satisfaction of the problem giver. He then proceeds to offer a solution to the problem.

The problem giver may interact with the adviser in this stage to clarify his statement of the problem, but he is to listen silently to the solution presentation.

The observer continues his silent role.

Stage #3: The observer makes notations on an observation sheet provided him and reveals these to the giver and adviser. His feedback should reflect the process in a non-judgmental way as he saw it. He is not concerned with offering a solution to the problem or an opinion of how it could have been stated, but to describe the interaction which took place.

The problem giver and adviser listen silently.

Analysis: All triad members should discuss what happened in the session to see how their communications skills could be improved. Questions such as the following can be used:

Was it easy or difficult to state the problem without receiving verbal response?

Did the adviser hear what you thought you said?

Did you have difficulty in listening to others and trying to formulate your thoughts at the same time?

Were you frustrated when you had to remain silent?

The following observation sheet can be provided for use with the foregoing exercise. A classroom demonstration using an experienced observer would be helpful before the technique is undertaken by the entire class. The use of a video tape recording of the presentation could be used to show the basis for the observations made.

TRIAD OBSERVATION SHEET

Check the aspects below which you observe taking place in the communication process.

Verbal Process - Problem Giver

____Stated problem in terms adviser could understand
____Restated aspects of problem for clarification (Stage #1)
____Repeated aspects of the problem which adviser already understood
____Stated problem in a manner which adviser could follow(Rate of speech, logical presentation)
____Gave sufficient information so adviser could offer solution
____Other aspects observed

Verbal Process - Problem Adviser

____Restated problem to the giver's satisfaction the first time
____Offered solutions which were presented in a manner the giver could follow
____Used language the giver could understand
____Other aspects observed

Check the behavior below which you observed as part of the process. Be as specific as possible in describing what you saw.

Non-Verbal Process - Problem Giver and Problem Adviser

Type	G	A	Specific behavior
Eye Contact	____	____	Direct and continuous
	____	____	Evasive
	____	____	Little or None
	____	____	Other (describe)

Tone of Voice	____	____Even
	____	____Broken
	____	____Mocking
	____	____Other (describe)
Gestures	____	____Natural
	____	____Forced
	____	____Distracting
	____	____Other (describe)
Facial Expression	____	____Relaxed
	____	____Tense
	____	____Jovial
	____	____Sad
	____	____Angry
	____	____Other (describe)

All of the exercises presented here are examples of those which can be used in the classroom. A teacher may want to develop his own, although there are a few excellent sources which present a wide variety of interaction techniques suitable for the English classroom. The paperback, Self-Awareness Through Group Dynamics by Richard Reichert, presents several techniques in relationship to various themes. The following two sources are primarily devoted to discussion skills but are adaptable to literature units as well: Ten Interaction Exercises for the Classroom by Dorothy J. Mial and Stanley Jacobson, and Learning Discussion Skills Through Games by Gene Stanford and Barbara Dodds Stanford. (A complete list of these and related sources with publishers follows.)

Interaction projects in the schools are proving successful in achieving the affective aims of education. Considering the fact that modern man meets more people in one week than feudal man did in a year or even a lifetime, educators can

no longer ignore the importance of human relations training. This phenomenum together with other ideas about the acceleration and duration of human relationships is explored by Alvin Toffler in his book, Future Shock. If youth are to be equipped to handle the growing social and emotional problems they will face, sensitivity education must be a part of their schooling. The English Classroom is the logical place to include this important aspect of education. English teachers who have not already done so should begin developing techniques or using those available as part of the curriculum.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE:

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